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By Julie Klausner

Ask Pablo Should I buy flowers for Valentine's Day? Don't they bring environmental woe?

By Pablo Paster

I'm having a European family feud Our last visit to my family in Europe erupted in acrimony among the siblings.

By Cary Tennis

What I wouldn't do for my cat After shelling out \$1,300 on a vet bill, I had to wonder: How much is too much to pay for your pet?

By Ada Calhoun

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SINCE YOU ASKED ...

I'm having a European family feud

Our last visit to my family in Europe erupted in acrimony among the siblings.

By Cary Tennis

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Feb. 11, 2008 | Dear Cary,

For the last 19 years, my **husband** and I have lived in the eastern U.S., across the Atlantic from my family. My two older siblings and my **parents** live within several miles of each other in the same European capital. It's an arrangement that's worked quite well for me because I find my **family** a bit overpowering at times.

Recently, though, the distance has been causing problems. This last Christmas, we traveled over there, taking our 6-year-old son and 1-year-old daughter. It was the first time we'd crossed the Atlantic with the baby, and we found the combination of jet lag and baby-related sleep deprivation crushing. We were staying with my parents (they're the only ones with a spare room) and it's fair to say that we weren't always gracious guests, especially in the first week (we stayed for three). All things considered, though, I thought we did OK.

A couple of days before we came back to the States, though, my sister and brother sat me down for a talk. They'd decided it was no longer appropriate for me and my family to stay with our parents when we visit. Our father, who's now 81, is not in great health and they feel it's too much of a strain for him to have us in the house. My brother offered to help us find a sublet or house swap for our next visit, and I agreed.

Then the conversation turned to my husband. They had complaints about his behavior. He's aloof. He's not a family person. He doesn't ask them



questions about themselves. My brother has been harping on this theme to me, on and off, for a few years. I've told him to go directly to my husband if he has a problem because I figure, why should I be the messenger? This time, he actually did go to my husband. And the result was horrible. My husband felt attacked, got defensive and basically told my brother to f--- off. This made my brother even angrier than before.

We left under a cloud, with everyone feeling crappy. Then things got worse. I wrote an e-mail to my sister saying I was upset about the sudden attack on my husband. In response, she wrote me a long letter eloquently describing what she saw as MY character flaws. She held no punches and was very cruel. To quote one example: "It seems that you insist upon holding on to every perceived slight against you in a self-destructive way that must be soul-destroying for you and is quite mystifying to us."

Can you see why I find these people overpowering? They're allowed to be upset, but I'm not. If I am, it plays into the stereotype they have of me as someone who's negative and "holds on to every perceived slight." You know how it is in families: People have their assigned roles. In my family, I'm the screwy, remote little kid who flew the coop.

To be honest, there's a grain of truth in some of their criticisms of me and my husband. My husband can be antisocial. I can be moody and tend to remember negative things. But then, my brother (who's extremely funny and charismatic) can be thoughtless and dogmatic, and my sister (who's smart and capable) can be hyper-sensitive and condescending. I'm stunned they think that attacking us is the way to improve family harmony. It seems especially odd that they've known my husband for 21 years and are now saying that his behavior is unacceptable.

My brother and sister insist that they love me and have said these things because they want to "clear the air." I took the moral high road and have refrained from lashing out at them in return. Instead, I wrote them a calm letter, admitting some of their points but saying I disagreed with their methods. I figured, why hurt them the way they'd hurt me? But now I think I was wrong, and that I should have "cleared the air" right back at them, because I'm still seething.

My parents are getting older, and I don't want to sully their last years with petty quarrels. But maybe this one isn't so petty. I feel as though my siblings have crossed a line in the sand. Right now I'm not talking to either of them. Cary, you always have thoughtful and "different" advice, and I feel as though this situation could use some creativity. What do you think? Should I swallow my hurt for the sake of family harmony? Or will it fester and make things worse in the long run?

Estranged European

Dear Estranged European,

I think you did the right thing in not lashing out. I'll bet you would be seething either way. You did the right thing.

But beyond that, I have only my own sad experience, which mirrors your own. I can only share that with you, feeling as helpless as you do before these powerful and primal forces of the family. And what do I do with my own sad experience? I talk about it. I talk about it to my wife. I talk about it to my therapist. I write about it. I talk about it in recovery groups. I carry it around in a big, heavy bag across my shoulders. I carry it like a stone in my belly. Sometimes it goes up to my head and pounds my temples. Do I feel evolved? No. I feel like a fool. I can do nothing to improve it. It just sits there looking at me.

My older sister can pierce my heart with a harsh word and I'm a walking zombie for days. It is remarkable. And so we do not speak. Not lately. I just stay out of her yard.

It's very sad.

A radio interviewer asked me the other day does my own family ask me for advice? Wow. Ha ha ha. That was good.

But then I had to admit my younger brother did ask me for advice recently. My father, who is 84, spit out a molar at lunch. My brother asked me what to do? I told him not to try to glue it back in himself. That was the extent of my world-famous wisdom on the issue.

When you're a kid, you do everything in your power to keep your siblings on your side. Were you like that? I was. And since I was in the middle I had a lot of work to do -- social work, keeping the thing together, mediating, working the art of the deal. But it seemed like the older ones could afford to fuck up. They had our loyalty regardless, but I felt like I had to earn the older siblings' respect. I don't know why that is. But I was in terror of being out of favor. And I find it's still true. Like I say, one harsh word from my older sister and I'm a basket case. So lately we do not talk. That's about as advanced as I get on the matter.

If you move away for 20 years, then when you come back for these visits you have no leverage, no practical context, no ongoing business with your siblings about which you can negotiate; it's all about the emotions and nothing about the practical reality of living together. The practical reality of living together is a great thing; people figure out how to get along when they have to. When they have to live together or live close, they figure out ways to make it work, to be civil. But you throw them together once every couple of years and they have neither the incentive born of necessity nor the skills born of practice to get along civilly and with good grace. So you get these these mind-bending emotional hellholes of trauma and rage.

And Romney says the family is under attack! Sheesh, what a douchebag!

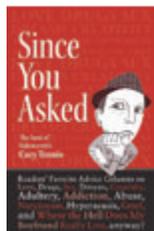
OK, venting. Sorry.

I've been reading Friedrich Engels' "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" (it's on the book stack in the bathroom) and it has freed me a little from my hidebound and very narrow notions of family, broadening my view, as it were. And one other thing I have noticed is that with a spouse at least you have leverage; it would at least make some small difference if you left. The frightening thing about siblings you see only once a year is that you're leaving anyway. You don't have much to bargain with.

And think about family, or community, or tribe, in the broader, secular, non-blood way. When your biological family thousands of miles away is driving you insane, you need a functional family nearby. What family have you replaced your family with?

Maybe if you turn your attention to that question, and look for a feeling of belonging with people who really do seem to get you, who like you and respect you and will put up with you when you are feeling a little crazy, and who will feed you dinner ... that might help. But that's about it. That's all I've got.

The Best of Cary Tennis



"Since You Asked," on sale now at [Cary Tennis Books](#): Buy now and get an autographed first edition.

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By Cary Tennis

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About the writer

Cary Tennis is Salon's advice columnist.

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